

Shadowy figure in Iran-contra affair

By Warren Richey

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Washington

A retired two-star Air Force general is emerging as a key private-sector liaison in alleged covert White House efforts to sell arms to Iran and funnel the profits to the rebels opposing Nicaragua's Sandinista regime.

Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord was identified Monday by Secretary of State George Shultz as one of three people who secretly communicated with the United States ambassador to Lebanon last month in an effort to coordinate plans to free American hostages by selling arms to Iran.

The disclosure by Secretary Shultz is the latest in a series of revelations suggesting that General Secord played a central role with a National Security Council (NSC) staff member, Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, in the covert operations.

Other evidence suggesting a significant role by Secord includes:

- The US Justice Department has asked Swiss authorities to assist in an investigation of both Colonel North and General Secord in connection with two Swiss bank accounts that may have been used to channel funds to the Nicaraguan contras.

- Telephone records show that repeated calls were made to Secord's home and business from a "safe house" in El Salvador used by crew members of a secret air resupply operation that had been dropping weapons and ammunition to the contras. The operation was conducted at a time when Congress had banned US military aid to the rebels.

- Secord has acknowledged that he sold a light aircraft to the contras in 1985. Federal prosecutors in Georgia are investigating the transaction.

North was fired last month from his NSC post after Attorney General Edwin Meese said North had planned and run the Iran-contra effort without President Reagan's authorization.

Secord has denied any wrongdoing, saying his role in the Iran-contra affair was that of an adviser. He was not available for comment yesterday. Appearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday, Secord invoked the Fifth Amendment in refusing to answer questions.

Secord, a West Point graduate and former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, is described by friends and associates as a dedicated and efficient officer with experience in covert missions and international arms sales.

He is also patriotic, they say, with a deep desire to serve the United States.

"I don't know of his involvement in all this stuff," says a friend and former government official, "but if he is involved, he is involved for the good of the country."

"To me the notion that Secord himself was part of a conspiracy doesn't ring true," says retired Lt. Gen. Ernest Graves, former director of the Defense Security Assistance Agency. "My perception of him is that when the leadership said get it done, he'd get it done."

General Graves said Secord was always careful to inform his superiors of what he was doing. If he was told to solve a problem, he would do what was necessary to solve it, Graves said, adding, "But he would not go off and take off on something when he did not have clear authority from above. He certainly never did that at the Pentagon."

Secord's work with the CIA and friendships with agency personnel date from the 1960s when he served in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Secord, a decorated Air Force veteran who

Continued

flew 285 combat missions, is reported to have been involved in covert US bombing and other actions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war. He also headed the US Air Force military assistance group in Iran from 1975 to 1978, a time when the late Shah was building up his air force with US firepower. Secord is said to have been on a first-name basis with most of the leadership of the Iranian armed forces under the Shah.

During the Reagan administration, Secord was promoted and became the first military officer to hold the deputy assistant secretary post for the Mideast. He directed a staff of 125 and oversaw \$30 billion in US arms sales and contracts to more than 60 nations. Secord's association with Colonel North began during this period, when he worked closely with the NSC in efforts to gain congressional approval to sell US AWAC surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia.

Secord's career hit an unexpected snag in 1981 when a CBS News report suggested that he had worked with arms merchant Edwin Wilson and had shared in profits from Mr. Wilson's arms deals. The account triggered a Justice Department investigation, and Secord was suspended from his job at the Pentagon for three months. No charges were filed and Secord was reinstated.

In 1983, Secord won a \$2 million libel suit against the source of the CBS report, but the allegations are widely believed among associates

to have damaged Secord's career and cost him a promised promotion to lieutenant general. Secord left the Pentagon in 1983 and went into business with former Iranian businessman Albert Hakim.

At the time of the Secord-Wilson controversy, Secord was defended and eventually reinstated at the Pentagon with the help of Frank Carlucci, then deputy secretary of defense. Mr. Carlucci was named last week by President Reagan as his national-security adviser to replace Vice-Adm. John M. Poindexter.

There is no indication of wrongdoing surrounding Secord's friendship with Wilson. In fact, court records show that Wilson, a former CIA agent, may have been a useful source of intelligence information for Secord.

Court records say that Wilson and Secord met at least twice in Tehran when Secord was stationed there and at least twice in Belgium in 1979 and '80 when Secord was working at the Pentagon and made regular trips to Europe for NATO meetings.

At the 1979 meeting, Wilson told Secord that there were North Koreans operating the Libyan's Soviet-supplied MIG-25 jets.

Wilson was convicted in 1982 of illegally shipping arms to Libya and is serving a 15-year prison sentence.

'When the leadership said get it done, he'd get it done.'

- Former colleague